



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

MODERN LANGUAGE NOTES

VOL. XXVII.

BALTIMORE, JUNE, 1912.

No. 6.

ERRORS AND INCONSISTENCIES IN DEFOE'S *ROBINSON CRUSOE*

I

It is generally recognized that *Robinson Crusoe* is a triumphant piece of verisimilitude, that it is unsurpassed among fictitious narratives for its air of guileless veracity. It is not so generally recognized that in securing this realism and this appearance of truth Defoe was led not infrequently to violate actual "truth" or consistency. He sought his effect not by truth of characterization, plausibility of motive and sequence of events, and the other common devices for securing general convincingness, so much as by minute particularity of detail in his statement of facts. This method, together with his unconquerable fondness for making out coincidences in dates, put upon him a task too great to be accurately executed by one who, like him, wrote from hand to mouth. Some of his slips were triumphantly pounced upon by a hostile contemporary writer, Charles Gildon, in a rare pamphlet, *The Life And Strange Surprizing Adventures of Mr. D—— DeF——, of London, Hosier . . . with Remarks Serious and Comical upon the Life of Crusoe . . . 1719*. Since then other writers have noted an error here and there. But many of Gildon's criticisms were petty or absurd, and some of the most important discrepancies have not been pointed out at all, so that it seems worth while to attempt a fairly complete statement of them here. However long the list, of course it cannot at all belittle the famous story.

The inadvertencies are of two kinds, confusions in the chronology of Crusoe's life and contradictory statements about Crusoe's situation and experiences. Gildon concerned himself almost wholly with the second sort of fault. The errors in chronology are, however, more im-

portant, because, besides the general light they throw on Defoe's methods, they furnish good corroborative evidence against the existence in the story of any precise and literal allegory of Defoe's own life, such as Defoe in 1720 alleged to exist. The best way to examine them is to review the outline of the story.

II

Only the events of Crusoe's life before and after his years of solitude are precisely dated, and the chief difficulties are with them. We may deal first with the events of his life on the island, which are roughly figured from the time of the shipwreck. Crusoe was shipwrecked on September 30 (pp. 69, 76),¹ so that his "year" ends on that date, near the end of the wet season (p. 117). There are no great difficulties with the first four years, three of the four anniversaries of his landing being noted carefully (pp. 114, 124, 136, 142). There is a contradiction, however, in the two statements of the time of the disappearance of the wreck. In the general narrative of the shipwreck the storm which broke up the ship is said to have come on the fourteenth day after Crusoe's landing, *i. e.*, on October 14 (pp. 61, 62); but in the journal we are informed that the storm occurred on the night of October 25 (p. 77). Then after the reference to the 4th anniversary come eight pages of generalizations, followed by the statement that "after this [probably the anniversary], for five years" (p. 150) little happened. He first built a periagua, after "near two years" (p. 151) of labor; this would bring him to the summer preceding the end of his 6th year, but on "the 6th of November, in the sixth year of my reign" (p. 152),—*i. e.*, just at the beginning of his sixth year,—

¹ Page references are to Aitken's edition of Defoe's works, vol. I.

he makes his first voyage in the *periagua*. There is no reference to what happened at the end of the five years of quiet (cf. above, p. 150), which would fall at the end of the 9th year on the island. In his next allusion to time, when his ammunition is running low, he is "in the eleventh year" (p. 160). The next time indication is in connection with the discovery of the footprint. After seeing it he cogitates for "weeks and months" (p. 174), finally reflecting that he has "lived here fifteen years" (p. 178) without seeing anyone. He then spends "two years" in terror, working on fortifications, etc. (p. 181), which brings him to the end of his 17th year. He then makes a tour of the island and sees the signs of cannibals, upon which occasion he considers (p. 184) that he has "been here now almost eighteen years." This is going a little too fast. He "keeps close" nearly to the end of his twentieth year (p. 184), and then lives more freely for some time. He actually sees the cannibals at the end of another two years, in "the month of December . . . in my twenty-third year" (p. 201).

So far there have been only three slight errors, but what follows is difficult to untangle. On p. 205 Defoe writes: "I wore out a year and three months more before I ever saw any more of the savages, and then I found them again, as I shall soon observe; . . . in the month of May . . . in my four and twentieth year, I had a very strange encounter with them. . . The perturbation of my mind, during this fifteen or sixteen months' interval, was very great. I . . . dreamed always frightful dreams. . . . But, to waive all this for a while . . . it was the sixteenth of May" that the Spanish ship was wrecked. After the account of the wreck he reports living comfortably "near two years more" (p. 215), and two pages later says: "I am now to be supposed retired into my castle, after my late voyage to the wreck." In the next paragraph (p. 217) he continues, "It was . . . in March, the four and twentieth year," etc., that he dreamed of rescuing Friday. Then, in "about a year and a half" (p. 223) Friday is brought by the cannibals.

The first sentences of the first passage mean

that the savages came again, and Friday was rescued, in May of the 24th year (of course fifteen or sixteen months would give March or April). But the statements on pp. 217 and 223 substitute for the "frightful dreams" of the earlier passage a single dream, which comes at the end of the fifteen months precisely, and put off the rescue of Friday to the end of the 25th or the beginning of the 26th year. The "sixteenth of May" and the "near two years more" remain to be considered. At first glance Defoe seems to be setting the date of the wreck in May of the 24th year; what he really means is May of the 23d year, the May following the first sight of the savages. The "two years more" means nothing, for the dream concerning Friday occurred ten months after the wreck and Friday was rescued a year and a half after that. The "late voyage to the wreck" is an attempt impressionistically to bridge the gap between May and the following March.

Friday came in the fall, probably just at the beginning of the 26th year (p. 227). Defoe makes three references to the length of Friday's life on the island. The first is vague and impressionistic,—*"during the long time that Friday had now been with me,"* etc. (p. 240),—when he had been with Crusoe considerably less than a year. The second runs: *"the conversation which employed the hours between Friday and I was such, as made the three years which we lived there together perfectly and completely happy . . ."* (p. 245). Crusoe and Friday, according to this statement, lived there from the beginning of the 26th to the beginning of the 29th year; i. e., Crusoe's stay was a little over 28 years, as he says at the end. But the quoted sentence seems to imply that they were, for the three years, alone on the island. In the third passage this fact is assumed and the date of Friday's arrival is pushed back to fit the assumption: *"I was now entered on the seven and twentieth year of my captivity in this place; though the three last years that I had this creature with me ought rather to be left out of the account . . ."* (p. 255). As a matter of fact Friday had been with him just one year instead of three.

Now at the beginning of the 27th year,

"when the settled season began to come in" (p. 256), Friday's father and the Spaniard are rescued from the cannibals. About a year is spent in laying in a store of provisions, and then Friday's father and the Spaniard go to rescue the other Spaniards. It was "the first measures used by me, in view of my deliverance, for now twenty-seven years and some days" (p. 277), a statement which apparently means merely that he had been on the island 27 years and some days, as my computation indicates to be the fact. The rescuers left "on the day that the moon was full, by my account in the month of October"; and then follows a statement that Crusoe lost the reckoning of days, but "had kept a true reckoning of years" (p. 278). This remark can hardly save Defoe from criticism, though no doubt he intended it to do so. In this particular case Crusoe's computations would have been set right by the change in the season, which took place about October 15. It seems fair to assume, then, that the date on which the rescuers went away was not later than November 1. About a week later, "no less than eight days," as Defoe puts it (p. 278), the English ship which has been seized by the mutineers comes to the island. The action which follows covers five days. 1st day: Two boatloads of mutineers come ashore and are surprised. 2d day: Conferences; planning; midnight attack on the ship. 3d day: Ship taken at 2 a. m.; Crusoe packs up his goods. 4th day: Crusoe goes on board; the ship does not sail that night. 5th day: Crusoe leaves the island after he "had been upon it eight and twenty years, two months, and 19 days." Adding the "no less than eight days" and the five days of the final action, one finds that instead of leaving the island on December 19, Crusoe should have been leaving by the middle of November at the latest. Moreover, Friday's father and the Spaniard, who had been gone only a fortnight, left a few days after the end of Crusoe's 27th year on the island; so that the "eight and twenty years" is not consistent with the preceding details. In other words, according to the details of the narrative there is more evidence in favor of a "captivity" of

27 years than of one of 28. In favor of 28 we have this statement at the end of the story; the words of the title page, which are merely borrowed from the text; and one of the references to the length of Friday's stay (p. 245), which is virtually cancelled by the next reference to Friday.

The uncertainty on this point is important in its bearing on the consistency of the dates which Defoe gives for the chief events of Crusoe's life. The only point considered by the critics in connection with the chronology of the story has been the discrepancy between the statement that Crusoe was 28 years on the island and the statement that he was shipwrecked in 1659 and left the island in 1686. Mr. Thomas Wright suggested that 1686 was a misprint for 1687; Mr. Aitken replied (1, lvij) that the date was an error but that the mistake was Defoe's, not the printer's, because "in the next paragraph we are told that Crusoe reached England in June 1687, not 1688." Then in *The Speaker* for April 20, 1895, Mr. Quiller-Couch suggested that the error is in the date of the shipwreck, which should be 1658. This suggestion Mr. Aitken accepted, in a letter in *The Speaker* of May 4, 1895, and in a note prefixed to Vol. VII of his edition (p. xvii), and he pointed, as corroborative evidence, to Crusoe's statement (p. 147) that he was shipwrecked on his 26th birthday. But what is to be done with the statement that Crusoe set sail from Brazil on his ill-fated voyage to Guinea "the same day eight year" (p. 43) that he left Hull; when it is perfectly clear that he left Hull in the year 1651? Obviously no single change in the text can set all to rights.

To return to the dates. 1651 is fixed as the time of leaving Hull because Crusoe was born in 1632, wished to go to sea at the age of 18 (p. 5), but stayed at home "almost a year after this" (p. 6). This corroborates the date, September 1, 1651, which appeared in the text as early as the 4th edition but was left blank in the first edition (p. 6). It is interesting to note that in the first edition the date of Crusoe's departure for Guinea, September 1,

1659, is also omitted (p. 43). This omission of dates which were to be chosen later so as to accord with later statements does not weaken the standing of the date 1659, for Defoe twice uses it, in the first edition in referring to the date of his shipwreck, on pp. 70, 76. Leaving Hull, then, on September 1, 1651, Crusoe in six days reaches Yarmouth Roads, remains there eight days, is caught in a storm on the eighth day and shipwrecked on the ninth (pp. 9, 11, 12). The wreck should have occurred on September 16. But on p. 147 he says that he escaped from that wreck and from Sallee on the same day of the year, and on p. 311 he says that the day of his leaving the island,—i. e., December 19,—was the same day of the month that he escaped from Sallee. This means that he escaped from the wreck and from Sallee on September 19. Here is a discrepancy of three days in the two statements of the date of the wreck in Yarmouth Roads. After going to London, at the end of September 1651, he makes two voyages to Guinea, and on the second he is captured by the Moors, on September 1 (p. 147). The year is uncertain. It seems hardly likely that he could pick up his captain in London, make one voyage, and start on a second one, between October 1651 and August 1652; yet this would be necessary if he were to be captured September 1, 1652. If he was captured in 1653, the two years he remained a slave in Sallee (p. 20) before his escape on September 19 [1655(?)], and the four years he spent in Brazil as a planter (p. 41), would bring him just to September 1659, the time named in the text for the voyage to Guinea and the shipwreck on the island. But there is one more complication. He said on p. 311 that he "arrived in England, the 11th of June, in the year 1687, having been thirty and five years absent." This makes the year in which he started his second trip to Guinea 1652. I have just mentioned the difficulty in assuming this date. It would, of course, make 1658 the year of his shipwreck. If one is anxious, however, to establish some consistency in the dates, apparently the simplest thing to do would be:

(i) assume that twenty-eight years is a mistake

for twenty-seven; (ii) assume that thirty-five years is a mistake for thirty-four, made under the influence of the miscalculation just before it (the two statements occur in successive sentences); (iii) assume that twenty-six, on p. 147, is a mistake for twenty-seven. These three changes, the first two of which are virtually one, would make the main outline of the chronology, I think, consistent. Of course they will not remove the lesser slips; but they are at least more satisfactory than the simple changing of 1659 to 1658. As a matter of fact, the text should be recognized to be inconsistent and then left unchanged.

III

Gildon, in his scurrilous attack on *Robinson Crusoe*, makes some general criticism of the book in addition to pointing out particular slips. "If the faults of it," he says, "had extended no farther than the frequent Solecisms, Looseness and Incorrectness of Stile, Improbabilities, and sometimes Impossibilities, I had not given you the trouble of this epistle." But he objects to the lack of patriotism which compares Englishmen with Spaniards to the latter's advantage; to the unfair treatment of English seamen; to the impieties and superstition and too great tolerance of Catholics. And if he can prevent the spread of these ideas, "I shall not think my Labour lost."

Most of Gildon's general remarks and many of his specific complaints are petty enough, as the above quotation indicates. In my list I shall include only those which seem pertinent.

P. 14. "telling his father who I was," etc. Gildon observes that Crusoe "got on board a ship, without so much as ever saying one Word to the Master of her, who we must suppose never saw him for about three Weeks, till, after his Ship was cast away, he met him in Yarmouth, and was there inform'd by his Son, who, and what he was; tho' presently after he had heard this, he asks him, who, and what he was, as if he had known nothing of the Matter . . ."

P. 15. "not tempt Providence to my ruin" etc. Gildon remarks most seriously: "If Storms are sent by Providence to deter Men

from Navigation, I may reasonably suppose, that there is not one of all that vast Number I have mention'd, to whom Providence has not sent the same Warning."

Pp. 52-54. "I pulled off my clothes . . . and took the water . . . I went to the bread-room and filled my pockets with biscuit . . . I had the mortification to see my coat, shirt, and waistcoat . . . swim away; as for my breeches . . . I swam on board in them, and my stockings." Gildon observed: "I shall not take Notice of his striping (*sic*) himself to swim on Board, and then filling his Pockets with Bisket, because that is already taken Notice of in Publick; and in the last Edition, at least, of the Book, you have endeavour'd to salve this Difficulty, by making him keep his Breeches on . . ." Aitken points out that "as for my breeches," etc., appeared in the first edition; he is hardly fair, however, in finding no fault in Defoe's method, for certainly it looks as if the detail were tucked in as an afterthought; the reader finds contradiction enough in the first two statements.

P. 69. "for want of books and pen and ink." On p. 70 he possesses ink.

P. 70. "three . . . Bibles." Gildon wonders "why *Robinson* should put three on Board for his Voyage to *Guinea*, when one was likely to be more than he would make use of, if we may believe his own Account of the little regard he had to any Religion."

P. 104. "certainly I lost a day in my account." This remark seems to be introduced merely for the sake of the immediate incident. Later he makes two other statements concerning errors in his reckoning which are inconsistent with this and with each other, and the second of which seems to be intended to cover up possible discrepancies in his statements: (i) p. 115,—"I found at the end of my account, I had lost a day or two in my reckoning"; and (ii) p. 278,—"as for an exact reckoning of days, after I had once lost it, I could never recover it again"; etc.

P. 116. "it grew as if it had been but newly sown." This is inconsistent with statements in this sentence, in the next sentence, and in the sentence on p. 127 beginning "The ground I had . . ." all of which are to the effect that the seed first sown was lost altogether.

P. 131. "I wanted . . . salt." But on p. 236 Crusoe tries to get Friday to eat salt with his meat.

P. 136. "How I did afterwards," etc. Defoe forgets his promise.

P. 145. "falling early into the seafaring life," etc. Gildon estimates that Crusoe "never

kept Company with Seamen above three Weeks in all his Life, and that was from *Hull* to *Yarmouth*." On his other voyages he associated only with the Masters of the vessels, and on his first trip to Brazil he knew so little of the language of the crew that he could not have picked up much evil. He must have had "a strange *Alacrity in Sinking*," etc.

P. 160. "there were pipes in the ship," etc. Defoe has forgotten that Crusoe saved a pipe from the wreck; cf. p. 51.

P. 175. "I had not stirred . . . for three days," etc. Gildon asks what happened to the goats when Crusoe went off for a six days' trip (p. 166), if they were "almost spoiled" by three days' neglect.

P. 196. "looking farther into the place," etc. Gildon asks how Crusoe could see the goat's eyes if the place was "perfectly dark," and adds that the "dim light" mentioned later in the sentence does not help the situation, because if there was a dim light it was not perfectly dark.

P. 213. "if I may guess . . . she must have been bound . . . to the Havanna." This conjecture in regard to the ship,—since, as the "may" shows, it is made at the time of composition, after all the events of the story have taken place,—is inconsistent with the fact that he had exact information from the Spaniard; cf. p. 272.

P. 224. "he outstripped them." Aitken mentions "the improbability that the savages who pursued Friday would be unable to swim across a creek, or would not shoot at him with an arrow when they saw he was gaining upon them."

P. 227. "the first sound of a man's voice that I had heard . . . for above twenty-five years." Aitken quotes "critics" to the effect that "Crusoe could hardly have lived by himself for so many years without becoming insane; he certainly would not at the end of the time have been quite as intelligent as he was at the beginning, nor would he have remembered such Spanish as he had once known" (i. lxiv).

P. 272. "and Portuguese." No Portuguese are mentioned afterwards in this part of the story or in the *Farther Adventures*.

P. 274. "fourteen, still alive." This is apparently a slip for "sixteen." We might assume that there were fourteen Spaniards and two Portuguese, in keeping with the statement made just before, but in the sequel of the story the number of Spaniards is twice at least given as sixteen; cf. *Farther Adventures*, pp. 50, 93.

P. 277. "I gave him a strict charge in writ-

ing." Gildon points out that Crusoe's ink had been exhausted long before.

P. 302. "Our strength was now thus ordered for the expedition." In the first edition the latter part of this paragraph read as follows (spelling and punctuation modernized): "3. The other two whom I had kept till now in my apartment, pinioned, but upon the captain's motion had now released. 4. The single man taken in the boat. 5. These five released at last; so that they were thirteen in all, besides five we kept prisoners in the cave and the two hostages." Here, as elsewhere, Defoe succeeds in getting an effect of verisimilitude with his figures, but here at least his use of them was only "impressionistic"; in reality he was rather badly muddled. He evidently felt that something was wrong, for in the table of errata at the end of the first edition he attempted to patch things up by the following changes: "for *apartment* read *bower*; dele *the single man taken in the boat* 5; for *thirteen* read *twelve*; [for] *and the two* read *for*." These changes, which have been followed in all subsequent editions I have seen, only make the muddle worse, as can be shown by a brief review of the narrative.

18 mutineers came ashore, 8 in the first boat and 10 in the second. Of the first 8, 2 were killed, and 6 surrendered, of whom 2 at once joined the captain's party, 2 were sent to the cave, and 2 were "pinioned," in a place not specified. Of the 10 men of the second gang, 1 was "knocked down" by the captain and apparently killed (at least, there is no reference to him later); 1, "the single man taken in the boat," joins the captain's party at once; 2 are shot and killed by the captain and Friday; 6, therefore, remain to be made prisoners. Of these 6, 3 are sent to the cave; "the other[s]," number not given, are pinioned in the bower. The situation at the end of the day is, then, as follows: there are 10 prisoners, of whom 5 are in the cave, 2 pinioned in a place not named, and 3,—in regard to whom it is to be noted that Defoe does not give their number directly,—are in the bower; there are 8 in the captain's party, Crusoe and Friday, the captain and the two passengers, the 2 men from the first gang of mutineers, and the "man taken in the boat"; the total number of men alive on the island is 18.

Defoe's mistakes begin to appear when Crusoe rearranges the men for the expedition to the ship on the second day. The paragraph beginning "However, that we might be very secure" is entirely inconsistent with previous

statements, and the references in it cannot be satisfactorily interpreted. It is clear, however, from the original form of the paragraph enumerating the attacking force, that Defoe has swelled the numbers on the island from 18 to 22, 20 named in the paragraph and Crusoe and Friday besides. The corrections in the table of errata reduce the total number to 19, but this is not the 18 of the previous night. Moreover two inconsistencies are involved in the changes: first, "the single man taken in the boat," if not listed separately as in the first version, must disappear altogether; second, the two following paragraphs of the text indicate that after the 12 of the attacking force had left there were 7 on the island besides Crusoe and Friday, making a total of 21. Defoe has apparently at one time counted two of his dead mutineers as living and at another time resuscitated four of them; and in trying to patch things up, he has involved himself worse by erasing altogether the man in the boat. There is no feasible way of securing a consistent text, and the original reading had best be left intact.

P. 326. "two hours before night." Gildon remarks that if it was so near nightfall, if they had three leagues to go, and if the traveling was bad on account of the snow, it is highly improbable that they would stop to give Friday a chance to "make laugh" with the bear.

P. 341. "1694." In the *Farther Adventures* the date is given as 1693.

IV

There is perhaps no more appropriate way of concluding these notes than by quoting, from Defoe's Preface to the *Farther Adventures*, his impartial "Editor's opinion" of the first volume.

"The success the former part of this work has met with in the world, has yet been no other than is acknowledged to be due to the surprising variety of the subject and to the agreeable manner of the performance.

"All the endeavors of envious people to reproach it with being a romance, to search it for errors in geography, inconsistency in the relation, and contradictions in the fact, have proved abortive, and as impotent as malicious."

WILLIAM T. HASTINGS.

Brown University.